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Does Death Render Life Absurd?

In his well-known essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus asserts that life, as we know it, is absurd. He also provides several reasons for thinking this is so – or rather several *examples* of absurdities within our lives – the most obvious of which, he suggests, is the fact that we are mortal (1942, p.58). Is there genuinely something absurd about mortal life *because* it is mortal, however? Does the fact that we die truly render our existences absurd on the whole?

In section 1, I will attempt to provide a general characterisation of absurdity. Next, in section 2, I will consider four aspects of mortality which might be seen as absurd from certain standpoints. Nevertheless, in section 3, I will outline the availability of alternative, equally legitimate standpoints from which these features of mortality would not appear absurd. Finally, in section 4, I will move on to discuss a further sort of mortality-related absurdity which might not be so easily dismissed (the fact that, allegedly, we live as if we do not *really* believe we will die), and demonstrate how, despite some objections, we can eliminate this absurdity by developing a more authentic attitude towards our deaths. In short, I will conclude that whether any particular thing counts as absurd is something which can only be stated relative to particular perspectives, but that there are coherent perspectives reasonably available to us for which it would not be the case that death necessarily renders life absurd.

1. What is absurdity?

Joel Feinberg (1992) likens a ‘paradigmatic’ kind of absurdity to the irrational, such that if someone believed or acted in a way that was irrational they would be doing something absurd. Indeed, this is close to how the term is intended in philosophical arguments, where some claim is labelled as ‘absurd’ if it conflicts with other accepted assumptions and thus, Feinberg notes, it would be irrational to adopt it (p.155). Nevertheless, Feinberg adds that mere irrationality may not capture the strength of what is intended by the term ‘absurd’. For

instance, I might hold two beliefs which are incompatible with each other, but if these beliefs are inconsequential, or the incompatibility can only be realised through very careful consideration, then despite my belief in both of them being irrational, we might not rush to call it absurd (at least outside the philosophy classroom).

Granting this, Feinberg argues that “The absurd is what is *palpably* untrue or unreasonable, outlandishly and preposterously so” (p.156). In other words, for absurdity to be present, it is not enough for us to merely believe or do something irrational, it must be that this irrationality was 'extreme' in some way, “whether that be the apparently knowing assertion of manifestly false propositions, or the apparently voluntary making of manifestly unreasonable decisions” (p.156). On such grounds, someone in the present day believing in string theory might not be absurd, even if the theory turns out to be internally inconsistent, but believing the Earth is flat would be absurd, since it flies so starkly in the face of the evidence clearly before us.

I think it makes sense to identify cases of palpable or extreme irrationality as absurd. Nevertheless, Nagel provides some everyday examples of apparent 'absurdity' which needn't involve any actual irrationality. For instance:

“someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down.” (Nagel, 1971, p.718)

In each case here, the actions would perhaps be irrational if they were done deliberately, but assuming they are the results of accidents or ignorance, no one appears to have actually done or believed anything irrationally. What makes these examples absurd then? One suggestion could be that there is something *humorous* about each of these cases. However, Nagel gives an alternative account of what unites these instances of absurdity, claiming that “a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (p.718). In other words, where we want or expect one thing to be true or to happen, but something drastically different happens, then that turn of events was, in some way, absurd. For instance, in Nagel's final example, there is clearly a drastic discrepancy between

our pretensions and reality; specifically, our pretension that a knighting ceremony be dignified, and the undignified way this particular ceremony turned out.¹

The concept of absurdity as discrepancy between expectations or aspirations and reality also evokes another famous discussion of the absurd found in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Here Camus describes absurdity as “that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints” (1942a, p.50) and elsewhere writes, “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (p.31-32). In other words, for Camus, our existence is absurd because, in general, reality cannot possibly live up to the expectations and desires we have for our lives.² The discrepancy at the heart of this alleged absurdity is thus the discrepancy between our deepest aspirations and our actual circumstances. For example, Camus notes that, “If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this world would have a meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world” (p.51). The implication is that our typical human desires are somehow unnatural and do not fit the real confines of our existence, and that is what is so absurd.

I think this characterisation of absurdity takes us in the right direction. Additionally, it might in fact subsume Feinberg's initial characterisation of absurdity as irrationality since, in cases of genuinely absurd irrationality, there will always be some discrepancy present: e.g. between the individual's beliefs and their actions, or between two of their beliefs that conflict. Moreover, Feinberg himself provides a further condition for absurdity which is very similar to Nagel's proposal. Specifically, he notes that where there is absurdity, there are always “two things clashing or in disharmony, distinguishable entities that conflict with one another” (1992, p.156).

Nevertheless, whereas Nagel's account focuses on just two groups of things which can be in disharmony (our attitudes and reality), Feinberg's suggestion here is broader: that absurdity could theoretically be present in disharmonies or clashes between *any* two things. Is Feinberg right to suggest this, however? I think he could be, and an illustration might help. Imagine walking down a street of small, humble cottages and then spotting a vast 100-room

¹ The fact that many instances of absurdity are also humorous could thus be a potential *consequence* of their underlying discrepancy/disharmony, rather than a constitutive feature of absurdity itself. Indeed, many philosophers argue that some kind of incongruity or unexpectedness is at the root of all humorous situations (Morreall, 2016).

² Especially important, for Camus, is our expectation that life have *meaning*.

palace sitting amongst them. If there is something absurd about this situation, that implies that our account of absurdity should perhaps be maximally broad, as Feinberg suggests, given this case does not *directly* include any human attitudes or efforts; the discrepancy the alleged absurdity arises from here is merely between the sizes and styles of physical objects.

That acknowledged and accepted, there does not appear to be any absurdity present in the vast size discrepancy between Mars and Jupiter. Clearly not *every* case of discrepancy in the universe counts as absurd then. But what makes one of these situations (arguably) absurd and not the other? Even if absurdity can potentially be present in disharmonies between *any* two things, what decides which instances of disharmony in nature count as absurd and which don't? I believe the answer has something to do with our *own* expectations or attitudes as the *observers* of these situations. Specifically, some scenario will appear absurd *to us* when:

- I. we perceive it as involving some extreme discrepancy or disharmony, *and*
- II. that disharmony strikes us as unexpected and/or unacceptable in some way.³

Thus, we judge the palace scenario to be absurd because the discrepancy it involves violates our own preconceptions about the typical homogeneity of neighbourhoods, whereas we have no such preconceptions about the sizes of planets and so do not judge that discrepancy to be absurd. Similarly, I might find it absurd to see a zebra walking down the street outside my house because I find the existence of this disharmonious event (zebras are not usually found in the United Kingdom) completely unexpected. Yet, if I had wearily predicted this turn of events (say, because I lived next door to a zoo and knew the zebra-keeper had a habit of leaving the enclosure's door wide open) it might strike me as more annoying than absurd.

We are most likely to find a disharmonious event absurd because of its unexpectedness when first discovering or learning about that event. However, in cases where

³ There are two broad ways I think something can strike us as unexpected. First, some event can be unexpected if it simply falls outside of our expectations (i.e. we had no prior expectations regarding it). Second, some event can be unexpected if it actively *clashes* with our expectations (i.e. we possessed the expectation that it would not happen). Something is unacceptable for us, on the other hand, when we expect or believe it in a sense, but find we simply cannot manage to come to terms with it on a deeper, more intuitive level (and this can be for a variety of intellectual or emotional reasons). In either case, something's unexpectedness or unacceptedness for us can both be constituted by our not yet having properly fitted it into our underlying, intuitive mental frameworks of meaning and expected relations. (See Proulx and Heine (2006, p.310) for further discussion of the kind of mental framework I'm talking about.)

we either do expect some disharmonious event, or the event happened in the past, we can still find it absurd because we have been unable to *accept* the reality of this event in some sense. For instance, imagine we knew a person's pants would fall down at their knighting ceremony because we knew they refused to wear a belt and had been losing their pants all day. In such a case, we could certainly expect the disharmonious event in the sense of predicting it, but might perceive it as absurd anyway because we have still been unable to come to terms with the fact that it can and will really happen, for instance, because we hold the attitude that that people should not knowingly allow themselves to be humiliated, or that knighting ceremonies just *have* to be dignified (even if we knew, on another level, this one probably wouldn't be).⁴

However, different individuals can have different preconceptions and attitudes, and so it seems to follow that a particular discrepancy could appear unexpected or unacceptable to one person but not to another because of differences in their psychological makeup. Thus, two individuals could have completely opposing opinions on whether or not some scenario was absurd. For instance, whether the concept of polygamy strikes one as absurd will likely depend on the culture one is raised in. Moreover, we cannot say who would be correct in such a disagreement since it appears impossible for there to be any overriding, authoritative perspective on the matter. If my above proposal is accurate, then we are capable of perceiving things as absurd only because we are limited in our knowledge of the world and possess certain personal or cultural attitudes, and hence we are capable of finding certain scenarios to be unexpected or unacceptable. Yet, if we were to try to examine things from a fully-informed, impersonal, and objective perspective (which would normally be authoritative in other disagreements), (a) we would already know everything about everything and hence nothing which happens *could possibly* strike us as unexpected, and (b) we would have no emotional or intellectual issues of the sort that could prevent us from fully accepting some fact once we learn about it. Thus, we would be aware, as a neutral fact of social science, that it is normal for men to have multiple wives in some cultures, and that would be that. Hence,

⁴ It is also worth noting that sometimes the unexpected/unacceptable disharmony which we see absurdity arising from can be the disharmony between our own violated expectations/attitudes and reality itself (e.g. this may be true in Camus' account of the absurdity of life). Indeed, there will always be some degree of disharmony between reality and our expectations/attitudes whenever we perceive an absurdity, by definition. Nevertheless, since this disharmony is not always the *relevant* one – i.e. the disharmony we actually see as absurd – it is still useful to keep condition I distinct from condition II.

nothing could ever count as absurd for such a standpoint (indeed, the concept might even cease to make sense).⁵

Granting this, it appears as though there can be no objective truth about whether or not any scenario counts as absurd. Rather, whether something counts as absurd will ultimately be relative to the particular perspectives it is examined from on the basis of the expectations or attitudes of those perspectives. It may be tempting for a person to say, 'I know I perceive this event as absurd, but is it *really* absurd?' However, this question is suspect. If it simply means, 'Are the facts of this event, which lead me to perceive it as absurd, really as I understand them?' then it is legitimate. Specifically, if a person has not properly grasped the basic facts of the scenario they are evaluating, we might say that their judgment of its absurdity does not apply to the actual scenario, and hence the actual scenario may not 'really' be absurd (even for them) because it is not really as they see it. Nevertheless, if the question means, 'Granting my understanding of this scenario is accurate, am I *right* to see it as absurd?' then the question is illegitimate and has no answer. It appears absurd to *that* person and that is all that can be said on the matter. Thus, whether or not some aspect of our *lives* counts as absurd or not can only be stated relative to particular perspectives on those lives.⁶

To reiterate, I see evaluations of absurdity being made in the following way: a person, with their own imperfect knowledge of the world and their own set of attitudes/expectations, comes across some situation X. After learning about X, they perceive it as involving some drastic discrepancy or disharmony, and the presence of that disharmony strikes them as

⁵ Admittedly such a standpoint would be able to grant that certain events are such as to appear absurd to certain *human* perspectives, given these perspectives incorporate attitudes and expectations which are at risk of violation. However, the maximally objective standpoint I'm talking about here will be totally detached from those sort of human concerns (otherwise it would not be fully objective) and so it would be unable to 'tap into' those attitudes or expectations nor feel this absurdity itself. Thus, there can be no such thing as 'objective' absurdity, only the objective recognition that some situations are such as to be found absurd by particular individuals or groups.

⁶ It may also be tempting to say 'I perceived X as absurd but, had I been more informed prior to discovering it, I would not have. Therefore, X is not truly absurd.' But again, this would be the wrong way to think about things. It would be like saying 'I found my surprise birthday party surprising but, had I been more informed beforehand, I would not have. Therefore, my party wasn't truly surprising.' Obviously, though, there is no fact about whether the party was truly surprising, only whether it was, in fact, experienced as surprising by certain individuals. Similarly, there is no fact about whether some disharmony is itself truly absurd. Sometimes two individuals can have different perceptions about whether some disharmony is absurd or not and sometimes those differences are caused by differing levels of background knowledge prior to encountering the disharmony, but that does not mean the more knowledgeable person's judgment is more authoritative or correct. The only exception, as noted above, is that of a person who failed to understand the basic facts of the scenario they were evaluating, in which case their judgment of absurdity would apply only to the scenario as it appears in their imagination, and not to the scenario as it actually is.

unexpected or unacceptable on the basis of their prior preconceptions. They then come to experience X as being absurd to some degree. Furthermore, and crucially, the fact that they perceive X as absurd arises from the combination of X's features and their particular attitudes/expectations; someone else with different attitudes/expectations might experience X as not-absurd, and that is as unproblematic as two people having different opinions on the taste of chocolate ice-cream.

This relativity does not mean that our investigation into mortality and absurdity has to stop here, however; there are two questions we might still be interested in asking:

1. Does death inevitably render life absurd when viewed from a 'generic' human perspective?
2. Does death inevitably render life absurd when viewed from *any* coherent perspective one could reasonably adopt? ⁷

To be clear, when I say 'generic' human perspective here, what I mean is the hypothetical perspective which would be held by any clear-thinking, reasonably informed member of the human race, abstracted from any particular culture or time-period (i.e. stripped of any personally or culturally idiosyncratic attitudes). I believe it would be interesting to know the answer to 1 primarily because this is a perspective which we all share to some extent, since it will be informed only by expectations/attitudes that are relatively fundamental or universally human. Thus, we may care whether death necessarily appears to render life absurd according to a 'generic' human perspective because, if it does, this is a judgment that most people would agree with were they free from their personal/cultural biases. It also stands as a kind of middle-ground between more eccentric or extreme perspectives, and thus could plausibly serve to settle some differences of opinion. I mentioned earlier that there could be no 'objective' evaluation of something's absurdity and this suggestion is meant to partly address that gap; the 'generic' human perspective I have described is about as impersonal and close

⁷ When I say a perspective is 'coherent' I mean it must be free from internal contradictions and also present the actual facts of our existence adequately realistically. When I say some perspective is 'reasonably' available to us I mean either that the perspective as a whole is one which most human beings are actually capable of adopting and living by while continuing to lead a normal, flourishing life, or else that the specific attitudes or expectations of that perspective which I'm trying to highlight could be consistently incorporated into a coherent and reasonably available perspective.

to objectivity as a perspective can get while still being capable of actually perceiving absurdity.⁸

It is worth stressing, however, that despite being an interesting perspective to focus on, the judgments of this generic perspective regarding something's absurdity will not be any more authoritative or correct than the judgments of any other coherent perspective. Thus, if the answer to question 1 is yes – which I will label the 'limited absurdity conclusion' – that would still not compel us to admit that death necessarily renders life absurd period; provided we could point to another available and coherent perspective on our death which did *not* portray it as introducing absurdity into our existence, we could simply dismiss the claim that death renders life absurd as only being rationally compelling from certain standpoints which one needn't adopt. To prevent this kind of move, my opponent would have to show that *every* coherent standpoint reasonably available to us portrays death as rendering life absurd – which I will label the 'robust absurdity conclusion' – and hence one cannot merely dismiss their charge as before. This is why, throughout this paper, I will also be trying to provide a negative answer to question 2. Securing this answer may be interesting and important to us because it will demonstrate that there are consistent and realistic worldviews we can reasonably take up and live by from which death would not appear to render our lives absurd.

Having characterised what absurdity is and the grounds upon which we judge some event or situation to be absurd, I can now outline what it might mean to say that we find a *life* absurd. In brief, if absurdities are extreme discrepancies which we find unexpected or unacceptable, then an individual's life will presumably appear to us as absurd *overall* if it is ridden with such absurdities to some sufficient degree. For instance, if a life is filled with efforts which are drastically misaligned with goals or circumstances, inconsistent or

⁸ Some readers may doubt that it makes sense to speak of such a 'generic' human perspective. However, I believe there are a set of core attitudes and preconceptions which we could safely attribute to this maximally abstracted human standpoint. For instance, it would presumably have at least very basic physical and biological expectations about the way objects and living things function in our world (e.g. expectations about causality, gravity, and momentum, along with expectations that animals must eat nutritious food to gain energy, that sufficient injury will kill them, that they will aim to survive and procreate etc.). It would also presumably have certain basic expectations about how human beings typically behave (e.g. that we care for our children, that we cooperate and form tight social bonds, that we like pleasure and hate pain, that we act on reasons and do not knowingly pursue futile or trivial goals or abandon our projects for no reason etc.). I am uncertain as to precisely what expectations/attitudes to attribute to this perspective or how many or how fine-grained they should be. Nevertheless, it strikes me that there are some expectations/attitudes which are relatively fundamental amongst human beings, and these are enough to give the generic standpoint sufficient mental content to function in the role I have cast for it in this paper.

contradictory desires, or sincerely held beliefs which do not even come close to fitting with reality, we would likely find these disharmonies clash with our expectations and hence perceive the life as absurd in general. Alternatively, a life might plausibly seem absurd overall as a result of just *one* instance of absurdity, provided this absurdity was fundamental or important enough in the individual's life. For instance, if a person's primary purpose was to care for their family but, unbeknownst to them, their family were entirely undeserving, hated them, and mocked their devotion, then this single disharmony might be enough to render the life absurd as a whole.⁹

2. Why think death renders life absurd?

In light of my characterisation of absurdity, we can now address Camus' assertion that our lives are absurd because we are mortal (1942, p.58). Putting this in the terms of my discussion above, we can understand Camus as claiming that death introduces some kind of extreme disharmony or disharmonies into our lives, which would be perceived as unexpected or unacceptable either from a generic standpoint or, more robustly, from *any* standpoint we might reasonably be able to adopt. However, what disharmonies is mortality actually responsible for? In this section, I will present four plausible suggestions, each increasing in seriousness, before moving on to assess whether they might (individually or collectively) entail either the limited or robust absurdity conclusions in section 3.

2.1 The dignity of a human being vs. the indignity of death and decomposition

If the absurd is perceived as arising from certain instances of extreme disharmony, then one potential case of absurdity which results from mortality might be felt in the juxtaposition

⁹ Why should I care if my life is absurd? Many of us may have a natural aversion to absurdity in itself. However, my suggestion, which I do not have room to develop here, is that perceiving our lives as absurd can undermine our sense of their *meaningfulness*, because we cannot find life meaningful unless it is sufficiently comprehensible and the more absurd something is the less comprehensible we will find it. Not all theorists believe there is a relationship between absurdity and meaninglessness [e.g. Metz (2013, p.6) and Brill (2007, p.7)], but some do [e.g. Camus (1942), Nagel (1971), and Pritchard (2010, p.1)], and many theorists acknowledge a relationship between meaning and comprehensibility or coherence, both in philosophy [e.g. Landau (1997, p.263), Seachris (2009), O'Brien (2017), Audi (2005, p.333), Cottingham (2003, p.22), White (2009, p.425), and Veal (2017, p.251-2)] and in psychology [e.g. Heintzelman and King (2013, p.91), Juhl and Routledge (2013, p.220), Stillman and Lambert (2013, p.306), and Hicks and Routledge (2013)].

between a living, conscious human being, and the senseless, rotting corpse they will become. A quote from Raymond Tallis highlights this point:

“Disrobe... and look at yourself in the mirror. The image is of an earlier time-slice of the item that will be your corpse... You are exchanging glances with the past tense of liquefying carrion or a handful of ashes.” (Tallis, 2015, p.22)

On a similar note Ernest Becker writes how man:

“has an awareness of his own splendid majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever” (Becker, 1973, p.26).

If we compare a healthy human being to the decomposing material that will eventually lie in their graves, it can be hard to suppress a feeling of absurdity. The strength of this absurd feeling is, I think, partly motivated by the kind of disgust we feel when reflecting on disease, injury, and the breakdown of our biological form. It is this disgust which gives certain body-horror movies their impact; as they depict humans being dismembered or metamorphosing into something alien and unnatural, we often feel a sense of revulsion and fear. The idea that our smoothly functioning bodies will one day succumb to this revolting eventuality, combined with our sense of ourselves as somehow dignified or otherwise above such an animal fate, certainly constitutes a fairly drastic disharmony and may well leave one with a palpable sense of the absurdity of death or mortal existence.

2.2 The incredible skills and capacities of a living human vs. the inertness of a corpse

More than this instinctual feeling of revulsion at what we will become, however, there is a sense of tragedy in what death causes us to lose, besides our dignity and integrity. Tallis, again, describes our corpses in the second person:

“While you are longer and more corpulent than you were the day you came into the world... you are nonetheless as naked and as lacking in estate. Homeless,

propertyless, wifeless, childless, friendless, jobless, thoughtless, breathless, pulseless, gazeless, and so completely sensationless as to not be able to experience even numbness.” (Tallis, 2015, p.24)

Not only does death take from us our possessions and friends in a sense, it also steals our capacities in their entirety. No longer will we be able to reason, dream, or plan. Neither will we be able to do such basic animal things as run, or look around, or feel the heat of the sun. We will go from being the most advanced creatures on Earth (possibly even the universe), to mere lumps of matter, “a condition less than that of the lowest of the beasts, one that lacks even the order granted to a crystal” (Tallis, p.16). Through death, we do not just lose our basic human capacities though, but also the specific skills and knowledge that we had worked so hard through life to develop. No longer will we be able to read or write, or play the guitar, or hold conversations about politics – it will all be destroyed in time. This adds to the disharmony one might perceive here; death does not just strip us of the valuable faculties which life handed to us, but also the ones which we struggled so hard to make and find ourselves. Moreover, when we envision this clash between what we are and can be and what we will become, it may well shock and appall us, and even seem to be rather absurd. As Steven Cave puts it:

“To create such a wonderful creature as a human being only to permit him or her to turn into dust seems indeed an extraordinary waste; a cruel cosmic joke at our expense.” (Cave, 2012, p.275)

2.3 The seriousness of death’s impact on us vs. the triviality or arbitrariness of most deaths

One last quote from Tallis expresses this third disharmony rather well:

“The mismatch between the difficulty with which we are put together – the love, patience, and painstaking concern necessary for our flourishing – and the ease with which we can be torn into meaningless pieces is shocking” (Tallis, 2015, p.16)

Connected to the loss of capacities just discussed, we can identify another potential absurdity involved in death: it does not merely destroy that which is of greatest value to us, it often does so without any ceremony or warning; we can die at any time and through the most trivial and ridiculous of events. As Seana Valentine Shiffrin points out, we are always sad to lose things of value, but there is a ‘special kind of dismay or despair’ when we lose something important unnecessarily or for no good reason (2013, p.149), and this appears to happen regularly with death. Some people have their lives taken during battles or while trying to rescue others from burning buildings, but others will die choking on food or from falling while trying to put on their trousers. According to some statistics, approximately one person is crushed to death by a falling vending machine every year, and thirty by television sets. We would perhaps prefer to perish doing something noble or heroic, but we rarely get such a privilege; sometimes death comes for no good reason at all and sometimes it comes for reasons that strike us as preposterous.¹⁰

This too, I think, could plausibly be perceived as an absurdity introduced into our existence because of our mortality: the disharmony between the nature of death as a permanent and irrevocable *end* to our lives – the total annihilation of all our future opportunities to carry out projects, pursue relationships, and seek out new experiences – and the carelessness with which the universe, and often other humans, treat those lives.

2.4 The effort we expend to escape death vs. the inescapability of death

Finally, we might also see the *inevitability* of death as adding to the potential absurdity of mortal life. Despite death often coming by surprise or for reasons which strike us as trivial, there is a relentlessness to it which makes us uneasy. We are given time on Earth to do with as we please, and for almost all other unwelcome eventualities there are things we can do to avoid or at least ameliorate them. However, as Bertrand Russell notes, “no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave” (1957, p.56). Human beings are gifted with an incredible tool-kit of problem solving abilities but, despite the efforts of scientists and doctors, the problem of death seems insoluble. Despite having unique capacities amongst animals to protect and defend the things we care about,

¹⁰ Even when not preposterous, most deaths seem to come for fairly arbitrary reasons like accidents or illnesses.

we cannot protect the thing we care about most – eventually we will fail. Another quote from Russell captures the dreadful inescapability of death:

“Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness” (Russell, 1957, p.61).

The disharmony here is clear; we try desperately to avoid death, often spending much of our waking lives doing nothing other than what is essential for self-preservation – and yet death is unavoidable, sooner or later. Thus, there appears to be an extreme discrepancy present between the implicit aim of our death-avoidance project and the reality of mortal life, and a discrepancy which we may perceive as rather absurd.

3. Do these absurdities entail either absurdity conclusion?

The passages above, I believe, identify four extreme disharmonies involving death which someone might plausibly find unexpected/unacceptable and hence absurd.¹¹ However, we might now ask whether these disharmonies are serious enough to entail either the limited or robust absurdity conclusions – in other words, whether someone examining human life from a generic perspective in light of these disharmonies would perceive it to be absurd overall, and whether this evaluation would be shared by *any* other perspective one could reasonably adopt. I will begin by assessing the first question.

Do we have any way of securely rejecting the claim that the limited absurdity conclusion is entailed by these cases? One argumentative strategy might be to deny that the generic perspective would possess any attitudes/expectations of the sorts that these disharmonies violate (e.g. that we should retain our dignity forever, or that serious things should always happen for good reasons). Nevertheless, because I have not given much

¹¹ Another feature of mortality often discussed in the literature is the fact that death threatens to interrupt our projects [see, for example, Nussbaum (1994, p.207) and Scarre (2007, p.60)], yet this does not appear to prevent our whole-hearted commitment to them. However, I do not believe this constitutes a disharmony of the sort we would normally perceive as absurd; so long as some of our projects are completable or capable of generating some value before death arrives, there is nothing irrational or disharmonious about our commitment to them.

indication as to precisely what attitudes or expectations the generic perspective would possess, it would be difficult to make this argument. One would perhaps have to survey a large cross-cultural group of people to establish whether they had these psychological traits and then make the claim, on that basis, that these traits would also be possessed by the generic human perspective, but even that would be somewhat contentious.

I will not attempt to go down that route. Rather, even assuming that the generic perspective would perceive absurdity in the above cases, I want to ask whether it necessarily follows that the generic perspective would also therefore perceive our lives *as wholes* as being absurd. It is true that a bizarre twist at the end of a film can be enough to render the whole thing seemingly absurd, for instance, if the twist undermined the core values or moral of the story, or rendered the protagonist's aims incoherent. However, it is also possible to imagine a movie being capped off with an absurd little scene which has nothing to do with the rest of the piece. As such, it might detract from the quality of the film somewhat but not always to such a degree as to render the *entire* thing absurd. The question now is whether the absurdities I have discussed are of the first sort or the second.

Starting at the bottom, the final disharmony I considered (our striving to avoid death vs. its inevitability) looks likely to be an absurdity of the first sort. The inescapability of death does seem to reach back into the life and its efforts in a sinister way, rendering much of the individual's activities futile. Yet, we can object to my earlier description of this disharmony as being somewhat unfair or misleading. It is true that we spend a lot of effort trying to avoid death, despite death being seemingly unavoidable; nevertheless, a fairer way of characterising our efforts would perhaps be to describe us as striving to *postpone* death as long as possible, and that implicit aim does not appear to clash with the inevitability of death at all.¹² Hence, in this case, there is no real disharmony for absurdity to arise from; our efforts are not absurdly futile in the face of death's inescapability because we are not really trying to *escape* death at all, just hold it off.

Moving on, the third disharmony I considered (the seriousness of death vs. the triviality of most causes of death) looks likely to be an absurdity of the second more innocuous

¹² I say 'fairer' here because I believe were we to actually ask the majority of people what the aims of their actions are (e.g. going to see a doctor about an illness), they would likely *not* say they were trying to avoid death outright, but rather that they were trying to avoid *this* mortal threat and thereby live longer (but not infinitely long). It would therefore be an unfair misrepresentation of their aims to characterise them in the former way.

type. It is true that the generic perspective might see something absurd about the death of someone who slipped on a banana peel, but this absurdity is closely tied to the individual's *demise* itself. The contents of the rest of the individual's life – their relationships, achievements, projects, plans etc. – seem to escape being tarnished by this absurd event since it does not obviously relate back to them in any way; it is merely one absurd thing which happened to occur at the end of the life and so does not appear to render the life absurd overall.

I am less certain that the other two disharmonies (involving the loss of our dignity and our capacities) can be dismissed as innocuous in this way, however. Granting that the absurdities here arise from the clash between the dignity and capacities of a living human and the foul, object-like corpse they will become, it seems that these absurdities will involve more or less the entire life, given it is *throughout* the entire life that we see ourselves as possessing these qualities. That acknowledged, I can think of an objection one might still make: that, although these absurdities do *involve* the entire life to a degree, they are only integrated with it in a light or minor way or are otherwise relatively insignificant. Consider a person with a ridiculously complicated name who went through life without encountering anyone who could pronounce it correctly. It might be that we see some absurdity in this scenario, and absurdity which ranges across the entire life. Yet, again, would it be enough to characterise the life as a whole as being 'an absurd life'? If that were the only absurd aspect of it, I don't think it would be enough. But are the absurdities involving our dignity and capacities similarly insignificant? Unfortunately, my intuitions are far less clear in these cases.

To summarise, it seems indeterminate as to whether any of the disharmonies I have considered could entail the limited absurdity conclusion. They would entail this conclusion if (a) the generic perspective possesses the sorts of attitudes or expectations which clash with these disharmonies, and (b) the absurdities which would arise from them have the necessary breadth and depth as to render our *entire* lives absurd. Yet, the latter condition presumably depends on where we set some threshold for absurdity and the former on what we can consider to be the 'core' human attitudes and expectations, and I cannot presently think of any way to settle these issues conclusively and non-arbitrarily.

Nevertheless, even if we conceded that the disharmonies considered were strong enough to secure the limited absurdity conclusion, I believe they would still not be enough to entail the robust absurdity conclusion. To do so, it would need to be shown that there is *no*

coherent perspective we can reasonably take up such that these disharmonies do not appear to be absurd (and so much so that they render mortal life itself entirely absurd). However, even if a generic human perspective would perceive them this way, there are clearly alternative and legitimate outlooks one can adopt which would present them in a much less troubling light.

We can start by considering the first kind of absurdity related to death which I identified: the clash between our dignity, and the indignity which overcomes us after death. It is true that there is a particular view of death we can take, juxtaposing our current form with that of putrefying flesh, which makes the change seem foul and humiliating. However, we can also try to take up different outlooks or attitudes such that we no longer find this feature of mortality absurd. One option might be to think about things from a more scientific angle and imagine that the particles which had moved through the universe to temporarily constitute our bodies and lives are simply becoming unbonded from each other and returning to circulate through the universe as they had done previously. Since there is nothing obviously undignified about that, we may cease to perceive any disharmony or absurdity in this instance. The problem with this suggestion, however, is that it is not a 'reasonably adoptable' perspective and neither can it be incorporated into one;¹³ we cannot live properly flourishing lives from this purely scientific viewpoint because we would no longer be able to do even the most basic things, such as acknowledging that some groups of atoms are more important to us than others. Neither could we simply reserve this outlook for thinking about death alone while attempting to combine it with another more ordinary perspective; this would leave us with a fragmented, truncated, and incoherent worldview.

What we need are new attitudes or expectations which don't clash with the disharmonies above but *can* be integrated into coherent and reasonably adoptable perspectives. Luckily, I think such attitudes and expectations exist. For instance, we might simply try to dislodge the expectation, which many of us might have, that we can or will be able to retain our dignity forever. If we can truly come to terms with the idea that our dignity is only a temporary state, the disharmony instigated by its loss will not strike us as absurd. Alternatively, we could try to take up a more spiritual perspective on our deaths, reflecting on the actual decomposition of our bodies themselves but interpreting this as our 'returning to

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

nature' in some way. These suggestions both seem to eliminate our perceptions of absurdity and, crucially, do seem open to integration into a reasonably adoptable and functional standpoint.

Given these new outlooks are coherent and do not deny the fundamental facts of the matter, I see no reason why we should not be permitted to adopt them. Of course, other outlooks may be equally legitimate, and this means one would also be free to see death as causing an unacceptable destruction of one's integrity and dignity, and as rendering one's life somewhat absurd for that reason. However, death need not be seen as introducing this absurdity into our lives period; there are less disturbing stances reasonably available to us from which our eventual decomposition, though perhaps disharmonious with the integrity we enjoyed throughout life, is found to be reasonably expected and tolerable and hence not absurd.

I believe the same move can be made with regard to the other three kinds of death-related disharmony noted earlier. It is possible to see a threat of absurdity in the facts that death destroys our impressive capacities, comes unpredictably and often for trivial reasons, despite its seriousness, and is unavoidable, despite our desperate striving. Yet, I believe it is also possible for us to manage our expectations and attitudes in such a way that we would no longer perceive these disharmonies as particularly strange or surprising. There are outlooks we could take on these aspects of death which would allow us to transform it from a cruel joke into something we can accept as a part of life, and as long as these outlooks involve no falsehoods about the nature of death and can be fit into our overall perspectives without rendering them incoherent or unworkable, I see no reason why this move should be objectionable.

For example, we may choose to see that, although living things lose their capacities when they die, this is just an inevitable aspect of biological life, and does not mean our efforts have been wasted, provided we *used* our talents while alive. Thus, we may be able to cast off the expectation that our capacities can or should be preserved forever. Similarly, one could adjust one's attitudes so that, although death often arrives for trivial reasons, this is no longer something that one considers appalling or surprising. The forces of chance reign in other areas of our lives; why expect it to be any different here? Finally, we could accept what I noted earlier, that throughout all of our self-preservation activity, we were not trying to *avoid* death altogether, but merely postpone the date of our deaths as long as reasonably possible. This

goal would avoid coming into conflict with death's inescapability, and so the disharmony *itself* seems to evaporate. In these ways, though our situation would remain objectively the same, it would no longer be perceived as absurd because of our new perspective.

In short, it is unclear whether any of these four disharmonies entail the limited absurdity conclusion and false that they entail the robust absurdity conclusion. Even if we grant that they would be perceived as absurd from a generic human standpoint and so much so as to make our lives appear absurd on the whole, they would still not entail the robust absurdity conclusion because I have demonstrated the possibility of accessible alternative perspectives from which these disharmonies needn't appear absurd at all. Nevertheless, in the following section I will consider one final disharmony which is potentially harder to dismiss using any of the above strategies. In other words, if this disharmony is necessarily present in our mortal lives, that may well be enough to secure both the limited and robust absurdity conclusions.

4. Death-denial

The final case of death-related absurdity which I will discuss arises from the assertion that, despite ostensibly being aware that we are mortal, human beings fail to truly believe that death will come for them. As Camus writes, everyone claims to know that they will die, "yet... everyone lives as if no one 'knew'" (1942, p.11). Although people will acknowledge intellectually that they are mortal, the charge is that we typically fail to actually *grasp* this fact and all it means for us. Specifically, we can assume that most human beings are aware that their biological life will come to an end and the animal that they are will perish. Nevertheless, although they are aware of this fact, they fail to truly comprehend the inevitability of their own death as the final termination of their entire subjective world. The demise of our body is something we are prepared for, but the final and irreversible end of our subjective experiences is something that we do not typically anticipate and have not come to terms with. It is this failure to grasp the true subjective world-ending seriousness of our deaths which, according to Ernest Becker, "is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that he will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him" (1973, p.2).

We can see clearly how there is a potential absurdity here; there is a disharmony between the reality of our death and our expectations/attitudes themselves. Our death, as

the end of our subjective world, is inevitable, yet we think and live as though this were not the case. If this is true, then there is something about our situation as mortal beings which we may well perceive as absurd, and an absurdity which is fairly fundamental, underlying our entire lives and the choices we make. Thus, this absurdity is plausibly significant enough to render our lives absurd *on the whole*. After all, we are creatures whose lives are characterised by mortality and finitude and yet we go through life without ever truly grasping this central and critically important fact about ourselves.¹⁴ It is also much more difficult to imagine a perspective we could take up which would *not* perceive this disharmony to be absurd; although I can develop an outlook such that our eventual decomposition does not seem unexpected or unacceptable, the notion that we are *this* fundamentally deluded about our lives is going to be difficult to simply shrug off from any angle.

If the above is true, then this disharmony may entail both the limited and robust absurdity conclusions. However, there is perhaps a way we can eliminate the possibility of this absurdity in our own lives and hence negate those conclusions by demonstrating that death does not *inevitably* introduce this absurdity into *all* mortal existences. Specifically, I have argued that absurdity is perceived as arising from certain kinds of extreme discrepancies between distinct things. For instance, in this example, it holds between an individual's beliefs and the reality of their mortality. Thus, it seems that this absurdity could be avoided, in principle, by eliminating or altering either of the two things in conflict. Indeed, as Nagel writes, "When a person finds himself in an absurd situation, he will usually attempt to change it, by modifying his aspirations, or by removing himself from the situation entirely" (1971, p.718). In this case, unfortunately, the situation is our lives, and so (ignoring suicide or the development of an immortality serum) it will not be possible to literally remove ourselves from the situation itself. Nevertheless, the first option does look plausible; we could perhaps avoid any absurdity arising simply by altering our problematic belief such that it no longer comes into conflict with our reality as mortal beings.

To introduce some new terminology, we should want to develop an *authentic* attitude towards our death, by bringing our beliefs about death in line with reality, even if that is cognitively challenging. Specifically, we have to live in full consciousness of the fact that we

¹⁴ Of course, it follows that, being unaware of this delusion, we will also fail to notice the absurdity of our situation. Nevertheless, I presume experiencing absurdity is not all we care about and that we would also prefer to avoid having a life such that, *if* we were to discover some truth about it, we *would* come to see it as absurd.

will die, and with an understanding of precisely what that entails: that it is inevitable, unavoidable, and the final and permanent limit of our potential for acting and experiencing and everything else. If we could develop a fully authentic attitude towards our death, then we may think that any absurdity would have been eliminated. If the underlying disharmony consists in our failure to be fully aware of our mortality, then this disharmony could be disarmed simply by *becoming* better aware of our mortality.

Nevertheless, some might argue that this strategy is not as easily employed here as it might appear since the *reason* we currently fail to grasp our mortality is, straightforwardly, because it is very difficult for us to conceive of our deaths. As Nagel writes:

“That's what's hard to get hold of: the internal fact that one day this consciousness will black out for good and subjective time will simply stop. My death as an event in the world is easy to think about; the end of my world is not.” (Nagel, 1986, p.225)

Essentially, one could argue that, to imagine our own death, we would have to imagine a world without us in it. However, in any scene that *we* imagine, we will always be present at least to the extent that we are taking a perspective on that scene (just as we have always been present for every moment of the universe we have ever witnessed). It is therefore impossible to conceive of our own deaths at all, from a first-person view, because death *means* the elimination of our first-person view on *anything*. One could then argue it is unsurprising that most human beings fail to fully grasp the reality of their mortality, because it is cognitively challenging for us to imagine what our own deaths would actually involve. Hence, we could be stuck with what one might call an ‘inauthentic’ attitude towards our own deaths: the state described above wherein we purport to believe in our own mortality, but do not really believe it, deep down.

I’m not convinced by the above argument, however. As Kagan (2012, p.188), points out, we would similarly find it impossible to imagine, first-personally, what it is like to be in a dreamless sleep. However, it would be bizarre to suggest on that basis that none of us can ever truly grasp or believe the fact that we sometimes experience periods of dreamless sleep. As Kagan notes (p.187) this would only follow if we adopted a theory of belief which stipulated that we can never truly believe something is a possibility for us without being able to imagine

what that thing is first-personally *like*. But in the absence of any compelling reason for adopting such a theory, and in light of the dreamless-sleep counterexample, I think we are on safe ground to set aside this above argument for the time being.¹⁵

Yet, there is another reason why it might be challenging for us to employ the above strategy (of avoiding the absurdity of death-denial by simply ceasing to deny death), not because a full consciousness of our mortality is intellectually difficult to attain, but because it is *emotionally* difficult. This is the thesis at the heart of Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*: "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else" and so we are driven to try and deny or distract ourselves from thoughts of our mortality through any means at our disposal (1973, p.ix). Becker begins by arguing that a fear of death is "behind all our normal animal functioning" since it is a fear of harm and dying which motivates us to invest all the energy we do into self-preservation (p.16). This is the case for all animals, Becker notes, and is why we go to such extreme lengths to escape and avoid dangerous situations. Fear of death is evolutionarily selected for, in a sense, because it is advantageous for the survival of our genes.

Unlike other animals, however, the problem for humans is that we are not just afraid of various deadly things in our environment, we are capable of conceiving of our mortality in the abstract. In other words, the human "is the only animal in nature who *knows* he will die" (Becker, 1971, p.141). We do not just know that death is a possibility, as animals do; we know that our own death is *inevitable*. Yet, this means the anxiety we would usually feel when faced by specific threats – "the constriction in the chest and throat, the pounding heart, the inner sinking – the feeling of imminent chaos and utter destruction, towards which the organism does not seem to have any resources to oppose" (p.41) – could theoretically be *constantly* present since we know, regardless of our current circumstances, that death is on its way.

Such a feeling, if experienced constantly, would be incompatible with normal functioning. Living constantly under the anxiety which we feel when directly threatened by

¹⁵ Some may also be worried that there is a potential absurdity present here, perhaps between death's inevitability and the fact that we find it impossible to conceive of our deaths first-personally. However, it's unclear whether this is a serious concern. First of all, I'm not certain there is a true disharmony here, but even if there was, we would only perceive this disharmony as absurd if we had something like the expectation that we should be able to first-personally conceive of everything that happens to us. Yet, very few would find the notion of dreamless sleep itself to be absurd, and I take it this indicates that the vast majority of us do not share anything like the above expectation. Hence the feature of mortality under discussion would presumably not come out as absurd in either the limited or robust senses outlined earlier.

death would be paralysing. As Becker writes, “I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right” (1973, p.27). Thus, the only option human beings have in order to avoid paralysis and continue living, according to Becker, is to find ways to deny or distract ourselves from our knowledge of death, so that this death-anxiety can be held at bay. Specifically, Becker notes that we may do this through certain literal death-denying ideologies, such as religion, which promise that we are actually immortal, and thus relieve us of our anxiety. Or, on the other hand, we may also subscribe to metaphorical death-denying ideologies or cultures, which can give us a spurious sense of immortality, even while acknowledging the demise of our body. For instance, when we create seemingly enduring things like pyramids, temples, or skyscrapers, we may believe, on some level, that we will live on in these things after our deaths. The same might also be true for our families or the causes we have been a part of (p.4-5). In short, we look to our culture to find ways of denying and ignoring our mortality: “Culture opposes nature and transcends it. Culture is in its most intimate intent a heroic denial of creatureliness” (p.159).

The upshot of all this is that the strategy I suggested for avoiding this absurdity in our lives – to simply bring our beliefs, aspirations, and attitudes in line with reality – may not be feasible. If Becker is right, then developing what I have called an authentic attitude towards our own mortality would be impossible or, at the very least, it would result in our being driven mad and paralysed by fear, which would not be conducive to living a flourishing and successful life. Perhaps there is a dilemma here? Either live purposefully, striving to achieve things of significance, but with some measure of death-denial and hence absurdity and incoherence in our lives, or try to live authentically and face up to our mortality, but be left so wracked with anxiety that leading a normal life becomes impossible.

The two options Becker presents appear to be either (1) deny one's death altogether and believe in some illusory immortality (whether real or metaphorical), or (2) live in constant conscious awareness of death and thus be driven mad with fear. Nevertheless, I think that Becker's conclusions are perhaps too pessimistic and so the dilemma presented above may be false. Whilst I would not deny that most animals seem to have an in-built fear of death, and that even abstract reflection on mortality can, in private hours, give way to the kind of paralysing fear Becker described, I believe there is a way to live without either experiencing crippling death-anxiety or adopting a self-deceptive and inauthentic attitude towards death namely: to accept that death is real, inevitable, and does indeed entail the end of our

subjective world, but simply to put this thought to the back of our minds. Grasping the truth about our mortality and refusing to deny it does not require relentless dwelling on death. Rather, we can develop an authentic attitude towards death, and try to come to terms with it, *without* it being at the forefront of our mind every day.

As an analogy, consider a delicious meal at an expensive restaurant. If one reflected on how this carefully-prepared meal is merely the precursor for something one would later on flush down the toilet, that might spoil one's appetite. But this does not mean that eating and enjoying a nice meal must always be an absurd event, involving inauthentic attitudes or self-deception. Refusing to dwell on the ultimate end of the food we are eating does not entail performing any denial or cowardly mental acrobatics; it simply means refusing to dwell on it. One can live honestly and in the truth of the world while still avoiding invasive thoughts which, while true, would unnecessarily spoil one's time. Sometimes the only way to enjoy our Sundays is to ignore the fact that Monday is around the corner but that does not mean we really convince ourselves that Monday will never come, it is simply a pragmatic decision to focus our attention on more pleasant things. Similarly, I propose that we could allow our attention to be taken up with the intricacies of living, most of the time, and thus avoid any paralysing death-anxiety, and that this would not amount to death-denial in any serious sense. Thus, there would be no potentially absurd discrepancy involving our thoughts or actions. We would not be pretending to be immortal, or lying to ourselves, we would simply be focusing on the parts of life which weren't quite so upsetting.¹⁶

Moreover, I think we can also recast Becker's claims about our commitment to monuments, causes, and our family in a more positive light. On Becker's account, our concern for these things was explained more or less entirely as a mere strategy for denying our

¹⁶ Some might argue that this suggestion still counts as denialism. Perhaps a truly authentic attitude towards death would require a constant consciousness of one's approaching demise throughout everything we do. However, this recommendation seems impossible to achieve, not because it would be too frightening but simply because our minds are incapable of working that way. When we truly engage with our activities, we must focus on them to the expense of almost everything else. We just don't have the brainpower to keep up a constant, ongoing background awareness of our mortality *and* live our lives. There is nothing special about death here though; there are many significant truths about our lives for which it would be equally impossible to keep up a *constant* awareness. Thus, it follows that, if life can be rendered absurd through our failure to remain perpetually conscious of death, it would also be rendered absurd through our failure to remain perpetually conscious of a *horde* of other significant truths. This view strikes me as implausible; we do not have to maintain a constant awareness of every important fact about our existence to avoid absurdity. More specifically, developing a genuine awareness of death but only checking in on it from time to time is about as much as we can manage and, I think, good enough to secure authenticity and avoid denialism here.

mortality by symbolically leaving traces of ourselves behind in more enduring things. Yet, by putting effort into the creation and maintenance of these things, we needn't be doing anything intellectually dishonest. Perhaps when someone's death-anxiety is reduced as a result of their investment in some external thing, it is not because they believe *they* will survive in that thing, but rather that they have simply redirected some of their self-interest *away* from themselves and into that thing.¹⁷ In other words, if I find myself caring about my family or my work, and feeling better about my death because of their existence, it needn't be because I think *I* am present in those objects, but simply because I care about things besides myself, and hence death, when it comes, will not destroy *everything* I care about. Understood this way, there is nothing inauthentic about investing time and effort into external projects and causes. It is simply a way of divesting our self-concern into external things so that what we value in life is more resilient to the threat of our own death.

In summary, despite the worry presented by Becker, I think it is entirely possible to live a full and flourishing life *without* having to perform any self-deception or death-denial. Death can be a fearsome thing, but by concerning ourselves with things besides our own person, and by refusing to dwell on it constantly, this fear can be lessened and managed. Thus, it is entirely possible to live on with an authentic attitude towards death, and hence avoid the potential absurdity that death-denial would introduce into our lives. We simply have to check ourselves, from time to time, to ensure we have not slipped from the more legitimate and authentic methods for dealing with death-anxiety into the inauthentic strategies of ignoring death or pretending we are immortal.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the claim that death renders life absurd. First, I established that we perceive something as absurd when it involves some extreme discrepancy which we find unexpected or unacceptable, and argued, on that basis, that absurdity itself is a property which only exists relative to particular perspectives. Nevertheless, I suggested that we could still try to assess whether death might necessarily introduce any disharmonies into our lives

¹⁷ See Scheffler (2013) for further exploration of something like this idea.

which would be judged as absurd either by a generic human perspective or, even more worryingly, by *any* coherent perspective we are capable of taking up.

After considering this question, it appeared there were some kinds of disharmony which death seems to inevitably introduce into our lives (such as the disharmony between the dignity of a living human and the indignity of decomposition). However, there exist consistent and realistic perspectives we can take on these disharmonies such that they do not appear absurd and, even if they are of the sort to appear absurd to a ‘generic’ human standpoint, it is indeterminate as to whether any of them are serious enough to make our lives appear *entirely* absurd. On the other hand, we did examine another potential death-related absurdity which would pose this sort of threat: the fact that we may be guilty of unconscious death-denial in our daily lives. Nevertheless, I demonstrated that it is possible to actively eliminate this absurdity through developing an authentic awareness of our mortality. There may be other death-related disharmonies which I have not considered – indeed it would be impossible to prove I had discussed them all – however, at least for these most obvious examples, I have shown that they are insufficient to secure the robust absurdity conclusion (and possibly also the limited absurdity conclusion), and I can think of no others that would be sufficient.¹⁸

¹⁸ For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I would like to thank Christopher Bennett, Elizabeth Thomas, the attendees of the 2018 Uppsala University conference of the International Association for the Philosophy of Death and Dying, and my two anonymous reviewers.

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